Parts of a Body

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"I hope you are not going to ask me my life story, because, well, everyone knows it already."

Young Marceau

He imitated anything he could think of
It wasn't imitation, it was play
It wasn't play
He was a bird
He took the shapes of plants and trees
He spoke silence, the language of fish
The body was boneless
Loose like elastic
He could have held the form of anything that vibrated and throbbed

Be Caesar
Be Napoleon
Be Robinson Crusoe
Be Charlie Chaplin

He asked, "Must the artist be the fool of society? Does he exist just to make us smile?"

He was a quiet boy. Shy. His schoolwork was immaculate. And he burned to perform.
When he was seven, the children of his neighborhood stood outside his house begging him to turn tricks. When he was nine, he was the main attraction at his aunt's summer camp.

His father was a Jew.
His father's name was Mangel, not Marceau.
His father was a butcher.

His father was a communist.
His father was taken to Auschwitz.
His father's body was taken to the crematorium before his name was recorded in the log.

September 1939
Germany invaded Poland. The day France entered the War, the people of Strasbourg were told they had two hours to pack sixty pounds of belongings each. Marcel was sixteen. He and his brother Alain were among the first to flee.

His brother became a leader of the Underground in Limoges. Marcel, a forger. With red crayons and black ink, he skewered identity papers. He shaved years off the ages of still-tender French children, making them too young to be sent to concentration camps. He dressed them up as boy scouts and campers. He held their hands as they went high into the Alps. Over the mountain and through the woods; out of occupied France and into Switzerland.

1944
His father was captured. He died.
His brother's name appeared on a wanted list on the wall of Gestapo headquarters.
Marcel Mangel left Limoges for Paris and changed his name to Marceau.

In Paris, he joined Jean-Louis Barrault's theater company and Barrault cast him as Harlequin.

Harlequin, the most popular character in the commedia dell'arte:
In Italian, *Arlecchino*
From the Latin *Herculinus*
"Little Hercules"
A hero
The namesake of the Harlequin novel
The lover of Columbina

Standing behind Harlequin, Pierrot pines for Columbina. Barrault himself played this role in *Les Enfants du Paradis*. He is the sad-faced clown dressed in white. The trusting fool. The butt of pranks. The naive, moonstruck dreamer. Ultimately, Columbina breaks his heart and runs away with Harlequin.

1947
Bip was born.

The Bip pantomimes:
Bip in the subway
Bip the street musician
Bip at a society party
Bip commits suicide
Bip as a china salesman
Bip takes an ocean voyage
Bip as a lion tamer
Bip as a painter
Bip as a skater
Bip hunts butterflies
Bip as the botany professor
Bip at the dance hall
Bip plays David and Goliath
Bip as the tailor in love
Bip makes dynamite
Bip the big game hunter
Bip as a matador
Bip goes to an audition
Bip as a soldier
Bip at the restaurant
Bip dreams he is Don Juan
Bip as a babysitter
Bip looks for a job on New Year's Eve
Bip goes to the moon
Bip and the bumble bee
Bip as a fireman
Bip has a sore finger

The theater critic Edward Thorpe wrote for the *Standard*, "I must confess to never having liked Bip anyway. Despite the debt to Chaplin, the character is close to Pierrot and the winsome whimsical comedia dell'arte crew, with his affected walks, limp-wristed manner, silly hats and bizarre costumes that look like a cross between little Lord Fauntleroy and an eighteenth century sailor."

1955
He came to New York for a two-week run. He left six months later. He was originally slated to perform at the Phoenix Theater. From there,

he moved to the Ethel Barrymore on Broadway. From there, the City Center.

The applause begins before he steps onstage
A white figure in the black deep
White
Because it shows movement
White
Because it hides the wrinkles
White
Because we are frail
White
The anguished, drawn-on lines of his face
The face of a clown

He spent his life explaining how his adult body maintained its soft-jointed looseness.
Critics remarked: It's amazing! The man does not age.
But he was never young.

Clive Barnes said, "How we love the invisible mantel shelves he so casually leans against."

The contents of his house:
Icons
Russian boxes
Pre-Columbian sculpture
Mexican pottery
Japanese dolls
Lead soldiers
Toys
Masks

May 1970, Hanoi
"I had the feeling there was no war going on, so kind were the people and so warm the welcome."

Countries Marcel Marceau toured:

Algeria	Hungary	Philippines
Argentina	Iceland	Poland
Australia	India	Portugal
Austria	Indonesia	Romania
Belgium	Iran	Scotland
Brazil	Ireland	Singapore
Canada	Israel	South Africa
Ceylon	Italy	South Korea
Chile	Japan	Spain
China	Lebanon	Sweden
Colombia	Luxembourg	Switzerland
Cuba	Malaysia	Thailand
Cyprus	Morocco	Tunisia
Czechoslovakia	Mexico	United States
Denmark	Netherlands	Uruguay
England	New Zealand	USSR
Finland	Norway	Venezuela
France	Pakistan	Vietnam
Germany	Peru	Yugoslavia

November 1970, New York City
He publicly broke his silence by reading excerpts of *War and Peace* on the radio.

He was married and divorced three times:
Huguette Mallet, two sons, Michel and Baptiste
Ella Jaroszewicz, no children
Anne Sicco, two daughters, Camille and Aurélia

He said, "I was not the greatest father. I was too busy flying around the world."

He bought a farmhouse in Berchéres, an hour outside Paris. There were four trees on the land when he moved there. When he died, there were more than 3,000.

He said, "I am a prisoner of my art. People do not want to see me speak, or use props or appear as a character other than Bip or the stylized mime that I have created. They are uneasy with a Marceau that is unfamiliar."

In 1974, Marcel Marceau did an ad for Xerox's new color copier. The commercial runs for 90 seconds. Marceau mimics a robot. He pantomimes copying both sides of a sheet of paper and pushing the computer around the office. The commercial ends with a promise. He says, "Call Marcel Marceau. If no one answers, it's me."

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The black stage is a universe without laws. It is up to the mime to conjure and rearrange. It is his to make the dark space become alive with recognitions and quickenings. To him, it is not dark, it is not space. Nothing itself is animated into a wall, a woman, a restaurant, a butterfly, a thief. He can hold out his two empty arms and motion that the world fits in between his hands. All of planet Earth floats in the arm span of one man.

On his relationship to speech

Studs Terkel said, "Only one guy outtalked me. Marcel Marceau. I couldn't get a word in."

Marcel Marceau's first wife divorced him in 1958. She said he would not speak to her for days and days. She called it mental cruelty. He called it rehearsal.

His third wife, Anne Sicco called mime "his only way of thinking and expressing himself."

He used his hands as he spoke.

He said, "I don't suffer from silence. I could be two days without speaking. I wouldn't suffer at all."

There used to be a rumor that he was a deaf mute. He dispelled this rumor by appearing on talk shows: Johnny Carson, Flip Wilson, and Merv Griffin.

He said, "I'm obliged to talk. I don't like to talk especially."

Marcel Marceau had a reputation as a nonstop talker offstage. Those who conversed with him found his conversation as entertaining as his stage performance. His English was nearly flawless, tinged with a French accent.

He said, "I think I am not so different from other people in my private life. Except that I don't like very much to socialize. I am rather a person who is on his own, I like to paint, I like to read, to write, and I travel so much, you know?"

There is a joke that Marcel Marceau released an album. The record consists of twenty minutes of silence followed by applause.

The critic Jeff Bradley wrote: "If Marceau ever decided to make such an album, that's how it would sound, except that the silent spots would be filled with laughs, sighs, an occasional sob."

Marcel Marceau did not like to reveal his original last name. "Mangel" was too common in France. Too many people came forward, claiming to be related to him.

He took the name Marceau from a general in Napolean's army.

He said, "Everyone in the Underground changed his name. You had to in order to survive."

In an interview, Marceau recited lines from his own reviews. He said, "'Marceau explains why theater exists, where it comes from and why it will be with us for a long time.'"

Walter Kerr actually wrote, "Marceau really explains where the theater came from, why it is going to last for a very long time, and why we like it."

Similar. Close enough. But Kerr did not write *Marceau explains why theater exists.* That was all Marceau.

Perhaps his misquote was not unfair. From a man who said that words are deceitful. From a man who said that words are not enough. From a man who said, "If I do the fish, I become the fish, I breathe the water."

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Bip is not the bull. Only the matador. Not the bull. To the side of the bullring, Bip the matador keeps a crumpled stovepipe hat with a rose sticking out of it. He may wear the matador's standard three-pointed hat on his head. But the classic Bip hat is there — almost as a reminder. Even when he kills bulls, he is still a poet and a romantic.

He dances, and it's all body. He's like a parading spider. The sweep of his arms conjures up a full stadium on the empty black stage. The bull has stage fright. It doesn't want to come forward. Slapstick, and Bip's pride is undermined. The failed expectations prick against his chest. Chagrin. Chagrin. Bip coaxes the bull. He drags it across the floor. But then, in a twist of his body, Bip sidesteps to serious. In a moment, he is fierce. He spears the bull.

Were you horrified? Did you think he wouldn't actually do it? Bip throws off the matador hat for his own. The stovetop hat. The rose, the rose. He is no longer the killer. Again, the clown.

On the predecessor

Children playing without words, as if dumbstruck in the streets.
Children playing without words, starstruck.

Marceau said, "How far back can I summon memories of the past? When I was five years old, my mother took me to see Charlie Chaplin's silent moving pictures. Ah, Chaplin! To us he was a god. He made us laugh and cry, purged us of our own misfortunes, showed us a thousand tricks. And, always, no matter how beaten down, he triumphed over his tribulations in the end."

The first mime company did not rehearse. They were children on parade. Children flying banners fashioned from tattered handkerchiefs. Children wielding tree branches as rifles and canes. Waterloo in front of them. Narrow streets behind them. A dozen little Little Tramps battling the police.

In Paris, Marcel Marceau met Charlie Chaplin. He recognized the aging film star at the Orly Airport. It was 1967. More than fifty years after the first Little Tramp film; more thirty years after the last. Forty years after the advent of talkies dented Chaplin's career for good. Twenty years after the actor was accused of un-American activities. Twenty years after J. Edgar Hoover asked the FBI to keep secret files

on him. Fifteen years after he left the United States for what he thought would be a brief trip. He was not allowed back in.

In 1967, Chaplin was nearing eighty. His fame was diminished, as was his health. No one else recognized him. Marceau's career was strong. The young mime was making television appearances and signing book deals. He approached Chaplin. And after talk of the weather, Marceau began to imitate the Little Tramp. Then Chaplin imitated Marceau's Little Tramp. Marceau brought his knees to the ground, took the Tramp's hand in his own, and kissed it. He looked up to see Chaplin's cheeks wet with tears.

A photographer had accompanied Marceau to the airport. During the meeting with Chaplin, the photographer motioned to Marceau to ask if he should take a picture. Marceau waved him away.

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Bip struggles against wind that isn't there. He is conjuring this force by stiffening his body. Ducking against the strength of the gust. Digging his heels into the black stage floor. He brought this wind here. He is controlling the weather, itself. Sky and water submit.

No. Not so. Walking against the wind, *pretending* to walk against the wind, he is less effective than you. You, on your way to work, proud as you set your feet to the ground, step by step, day by day.

Is he being? Or is he representing?
Is he ?

On a tightrope, he is buoyant. The entire stage floor is a string. It's a millimeter wide. It bends and springs.

Is he ?
Is he playing?

In writing they say, "Show, don't tell."

You do not write, "Bip is impatient."

You write, "Bip taps his feet, and looks all around him. He sways his arms, his fingertips barely grazing the sides of his legs. He rolls his eyes at his date, gesturing toward the door."

Even words are asked to be more than descriptive. They cannot just represent. They cannot sit pretty and let the reader do the work. Even the words try to inhabit. To set a scene.

Then the writer is just a wannabe actor. The actor can twist and bend. Now he is a bird. Now he is a flower. Writers must spell it out. F-L-O-W-E-R. And still, it's just a word. It can't dance. It can't run. It can't fall. You can read it. You can do so much as to pro-nounce it. Try to taste the sibilants as your tap your tongue against your teeth. But you still lack the shape and presence of a body.

On the unwritten book

Marcel Marceau signed a book deal in 1965 to write an autobiography. He titled this book *My Silent Cry*. It was slated for release in 1970. It did not come out in 1970.

In 1983, he said in an interview, "Now they are desperate. But I don't think the book is late. It's ripe to come out now. I feel I'm in my prime. If I had died during the sixties, I would not have been 'achieved.' I know time is running out. I have now 10 years of full power. If I'm not better now than I was 10 years ago I would have stopped. How could I tell? The public."

But the book did not come out in 1983 either. It had not come out by 2007, the year that he died. And the world would never know what Marcel Marceau cried about, openly or privately, in silence or out loud.

On crying

Bip never cries. Bip doesn't exactly "take it like a man." He is too sensitive for that. But he never weeps open tears. When the butterfly's wings stop flapping, when it wilts in his fingers, when it changes its form to more insect and less flower, the corners of Bip's lips turn down. His eyes hollow out. He turns into a mannequin. But he doesn't cry.

Pedrolino is sometimes portrayed as a servant. More often, he is the youngest son, the baby of the family.

Pedrolino cries. He cries when his wife Franceschina is unfaithful, shedding tears of guilt for crimes he did not commit. He cries when he

is caught and punished for playing tricks on Pantaloon and the Doctor, tricks he himself was tricked into playing. He cries when he is beaten by his masters. He cries when he is given a plate of spaghetti, more and more tears streaming down his face with each bite.

He cries and he is not given a mask to hide. His face is powdered white. White to show movement. White to enhance the expressions. White and white alone to give him a range the others are denied.

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Why this black box? The empty space? Why always perform in a darkened, scraped-out spot?

The mime whirls his arms in the air. His gestures leave a trail: the awning, the veranda, the colonnade. A ghosted landscape rises up wherever his fingers point.

Of course, first there was nothing. Before there was a thing, there was nothing. The earth was formless and empty. Such was the base. God created the world in dark space. The matter that we touch, see, and feel — the architecture and the moss — those were the mistakes.

Silence filters the relationship between words. Between human beings. Every speech is full of empty holes. Text is pockmarked with spaces. No matter how hard we try, the things that exist will never outnumber the things that do not exist.

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